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FM AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3534
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RUEHWN/AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN PRIORITY 1859
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 0533
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RUEHKG/AMEMBASSY KINGSTON PRIORITY 2514
RUEHPO/AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO PRIORITY 0949
RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4108
RUEHSP/AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN PRIORITY 1612
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCPDO/USDOC WASHDC PRIORITY 1456
RUCOWCV/CUSTOMS CARIBBEAN ATTACHE MIAMI FL PRIORITY
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STATE FOR WHA, WHA/CAR, WHA/EPSC, INR/IAA;
USSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD; TREASURY FOR OASIA-J LEVINE;
USDOC FOR 4322/ITA/MAC/WH/CARIBBEAN BASIN DIVISION;
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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTIONS 2006 SERIES #1: LOOKING TOWARD
THE MAY 16 ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) This is the first cable in a series reporting on
the upcoming elections in the Dominican Republic .

Election Series #1: Looking Toward the May 16 Elections

On May 16 Dominican voters will choose all 32 senators, 178
representatives (up from the current 150 members of the lower
house of congress), and 2228 municipal mayors and city
council members to serve from 2006-2010. The two major
opposition parties will present a unified list in 25 of the
32 provinces. The three major political parties and 21 minor
ones await distribution of 593 million pesos (17 million
dollars) in public funding for their campaigns. Only the
ruling PLD has announced its candidates, but no matter - the
Central Election Board (JCE) on January 26 declared the
campaign open, and candidates' caravanas hit the streets
almost immediately.

Only a year and a half ago President Fernandez defeated
incumbent Hipolito Mejia by 57 percent to 34 percent. The
Dominican Republic is again working up its pre-electoral
emotions, though not to the fever pitch of that presidential
contest.

The Stakes
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For both the government and the opposition, the strategic
objective will be to control congress and as many of the 151
municipal governments as possible. Twenty-six new
municipalities have been created since 2002. The opposition
PRD now holds most senate seats, a plurality of the lower
house, more than two-thirds of the mayoral positions, and
many of the city council seats. The partisan split between

the executive and legislative branches since Fernandez took office has slowed approvals of needed fiscal reforms and DR-CAFTA ratification. Relations between the National Palace and city halls have frayed over the past 18 months, leading to a testy confrontation in January over mayors' accountability for their use of funds provided by the central government. Fernandez had similar trouble with cohabitation in his 1996-2000 term; his popularity sank and the PLD candidate to succeed him in the 2000 election placed third.

A New Litmus Test: Pink vs. Purple

Pink. The PRD and PRSC have decided they can best recover from their 2004 defeat by combining forces to protect their legislative and municipal turf. The PRD anticipates some erosion, but expects to retain a majority in the Senate and a plurality in the House of Representatives and many local offices. The PRSC, which sank to less than 9% of the national vote in 2004, simply hopes to survive as a political force. Both suffer from divided leadership. Both fear the PLD will use government resources to boost its candidates' appeal, as Mejia's PRD did in 2004. The antidote is the "pink alliance" of the white PRD and red PRSC, a complex accord to run common candidates for most of the jobs up for election. The unprecedented coalition of these historical adversaries will, they hope, enable them to shape the legislative agenda and compel more government cooperation with the opposition's city halls.

PRD secretary general Orlando Jorge Mera and PRSC secretary general Vctor Gomez Casanova, younger politicians with a modern aura, have worn down entrenched local party chiefs and

fended off misgivings of prominent elders including PRSC president Federico "Quique" Antun Batlle. Leaders of both parties say the alliance is a fait accompli soon to be formalized and notified to the JCE by March 2, the deadline for registering party alliances. PRD president Ramon Alburquerque and Jorge Mera have been consistently positive about the alliance. The PRSC's favorable decision at an assembly January 29 is being viewed as a victory not only for Gomez Casanova but also for his political mentor, influential Dominican Municipal League boss Amable Aristy Castro) reputed to be seeking a presidential candidacy in 2008.

The alliance accord will include running common candidates for all elected positions in the National District and 26 of the 31 provinces, according to Aristy Castro and Gomez Casanova. In three provinces, the parties will run their candidates independently; in one province, there will be common candidates only at the congressional level; in one more, only the municipal candidacies will be in common. Both parties have to convince local cadres to abandon their preferred candidates) many of them close friends or relatives -- and support former political adversaries. National leaders are betting that most of the disgruntled will jump on the train as the campaign gets underway and that the recalcitrant will forgo the elections rather than bolt to the PLD. The alliance is to be signed February 10 and launched at a ceremony February 28.

That said, the alliance is likely to fail in a few localities and lose some influential dropouts. For example, followers of a PRD mayor in the capital suburb of Boca Chica have protested vocally and visibly at national party meetings. We have been told that even where both parties support a popular mayor as the alliance candidate, for example in Santo Domingo North, we have been told that PRD members will refuse to vote for PRSC candidates for the House of Representatives. Prominent Reformistas Hector Rodriguez Pimentel and Angel Lockward have publicly opposed the alliance and say they and five other PRSC leaders will ally with the PLD. These dissidents could link up with senior PRSC figures in the Fernandez administration, led by Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso.

To its detractors, the alliance is an undignified scheme to

hand out opportunities for power and graft, in disregard of public interest. The secretaries general have insisted to us that it is about more than patronage and personal ambition; their parties are preparing a "national agenda." Drafters include PRD intellectuals ex-labor minister Milton Ray Guevara, ex-education minister Yvelisse Prats de Perez, and ex-director Tirso Mejia Ricart; for the PRSC, Amable Aristy Castro, representative Licelott Marte de Barrios, and ex-Central Bank governor Luis Toral.

Purple: The Government,s Opening Shots.

In a speech before PLD party members on February 5, President Fernandez shifted from his accustomed professorial discourse into impassioned, raised-fist rhetoric; he denounced the alliance for promoting "ungovernability" and "instability" and trying to impose "the tyranny of the majority" in congress. "He's running scared," clucked the media and the opposition. Some predicted that the president's undeniably high poll ratings might not translate into votes for PLD candidates. But others have advised us not to underestimate the PLD's doctrine of discipline, a holdover from its leftist past.

In a campaign ad February 9, the PLD requested voters' support to prevent the return of "the shameless ones" who were fingered as responsible for high unemployment, inflation, devaluation, ruin of small businesses, international debt, and bank failures during the past administration; whose U.S. visas have been revoked for suspected corruption; and who spent more than 20 billion pesos (570 million dollars) in municipal funds "without accomplishing anything." Indeed, the PRD's biggest liability this election season is public discontent with the lingering effects of the nation,s 2003-04 financial crisis.

Races to Watch

Two noteworthy races may reveal the strengths and weaknesses on both sides. In the mayor's race in Santo Domingo National District (capital city center), effective and popular PLD mayor Roberto Salcedo is being challenged for his job by politically skillful and well-regarded speaker of the House of Representatives Alfredo Pacheco (PRD). Salcedo has the advantage of an incumbent with high approval ratings, but Pacheco grew up in Santo Domingo's barrios, has Afro-Dominican ancestry, and is viewed as a "man of the pueblo" in contrast to the middle-class mayor. Thanks to his congressional leadership, Pacheco has good relations with the government and the major parties. He conducted his first campaign activity virtually devoid of PRD flags or symbols, to dissociate himself from the Mejia debacle. In fact, Pacheco was never close to Mejia and opposed his wishes on several occasions. If Pacheco wins, he would boost his potential as a possible future presidential candidate.

The other bellwether campaign is the senate race in Santiago, the northern regional capital. Attorney General Dominguez Brito, the PLD's candidate for senator from this politically important province, is trying for this seat a second time) having been deprived of victory in 2002 by PRD-engineered shenanigans, say many of our contacts. One of Fernandez's most effective ministers, Dominguez Brito credibly aspires to become a future presidential candidate. The self-proclaimed opposition alliance candidate (to be confirmed) is PRD elder Jose Rafael Abinader, a university rector, businessman, and unsuccessful pre-candidate for president in 2004. With his wealth, PRD following, and expected support of the locally strong PRSC, he would be a credible contender.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site (<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo>) along with extensive other material.

